

HOLINESS IN THE GOSPEL TRADITION

THE WORDS, ACTS & MISSION OF JESUS

360-DEGREE HOLINESS
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REVD DR C T SAMUEL

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INTRODUCTION

Holiness in the Old Testament is often a rich discussion with ritual, moral, situational, cultural and of course spiritual dimensions. Discussion of holiness in the New Testament, in contrast, not least in the gospels, can so easily become one-dimensional where holiness seems to be primarily synonymous with good ethical conduct, not least in the preaching and teaching of Jesus. Indeed scholars like Peterson argue that Jesus offers very little direct teaching on the theme of holiness and sanctification.¹

Whether one agrees with Peterson I imagine will depend in large part on what we think we mean when we speak of holiness. Rogerson insightfully points out, ‘Holiness is a word in the English language whose meaning depends upon the contexts in which it is used and the interests of those who use it.’² This is, of course, true of virtually all English words, but it seems especially true of holiness.

It is often easier to identify what one does not mean than what one does mean when speaking of holiness. Nonetheless, at the very least

¹ cf. David Peterson, *Possessed By God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 27.

² John Rogerson, ‘What is Holiness?’ *Holiness Past & Present*, Ed. S C Barton, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 3.

we can perhaps agree that ‘First and foremost, holiness in scripture is a description of God and his character.’³ If this is true then what might the Gospels have to say about holiness, particularly with regard to the life and ministry of Jesus?

If we look for the occurrence of words from the *hagios/hagiadzō* word group, such as holiness or sanctification in the Synoptics then we find that the evangelists use these words infrequently. This is as true in the Synoptics and is only slightly less true in John. Dunn notes that the motif of holiness is not prominent in the gospel traditions, and that most of the explicit references in the narratives are quite conventional in character (e.g., holy city, etc).⁴

Certainly, if we look for words from the *hagios* word group on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels as a whole, then they are less common still, apart from perhaps in John’s Gospel, particularly Jesus’ prayer that God would sanctify the disciples in truth (Jn 17). However, if we heed Dunn’s apposite warning that the presence of holiness in the biblical

³ cf. Peterson (1995), 16-17.

⁴ Cf. James D G Dunn, ‘Jesus and Holiness: The Challenge of Purity,’ *Holiness Past & Present* (Ed.) Stephen C Barton, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 171.

tradition should not be limited to places where the *qâdôsh/hagios* word group appears⁵ then we can begin to look further afield.

Borg's work on the relationship between holiness, politics and conflict is very helpful in this regard. Borg argues that after a century of Jewish independence was ended by Roman occupation religious Jews wrestled with the question of how loyalty to Yahweh was to be maintained in the changed circumstances. The answer provided by postexilic experience seemed clear: *be holy*.

He goes on to argue that different groups within Judaism had differing understandings of what it meant to be holy.⁶ With regard to the question of holiness two of the most significant groups in the first century were the Essenes and the Pharisees, who may or may not have emerged from the Maccabean hasidim.⁷

The Essenes understood holiness in terms of purity of life requiring separation *from* society. 'Convinced that a life of holiness within society as presently constituted was impossible, they withdrew from the

⁵ Dunn (2003a), 169.

⁶ cf. Marcus J Borg, *Conflict, Holiness & Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 56ff.

⁷ cf. Martin Hengel, *Judaism & Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1974), 176.

mainstream of society to the wilderness...⁸ The Pharisees, in contrast, understood holiness to require separation *within* society.

For them the pursuit of holiness implied full compliance with the demands of Torah. Crucially, if the presence of the holy were to become possible within society it was necessary for ordinary members of the society to comply with rules of purity, normally applied only to priests, and then only when they ministered in the Temple.⁹

Borg argues, insightfully, that the Jesus movement sought to offer an alternative view of what it meant to be holy *within* society and that it is this alternative or competing vision which accounts for the numerous recorded conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospels.¹⁰ Exploring some of these conflicts, then, might give some insight into the Evangelist's take on Jesus' understanding of holiness.

EXPLORING THE CONFLICT

Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees in Mark's Gospel are intriguing not least because the Pharisees fade in significance towards the latter part of the gospel and disappear from view completely by the end of

⁸ Borg, 57.

⁹ cf. Borg, 58ff.

¹⁰ cf. Borg, 74ff.

chapter 12. The chief priests and the scribes emerge as the chief protagonists and the primary instruments of Jesus' crucifixion. It is noteworthy that when Judas seeks to betray Jesus he seeks out not the Pharisees but the chief priests (Mk 14.10–11; Matt 26.14, Lk 22.4).

Luke follows a similar pattern though Matthew's Gospel is less stark. The Pharisees fade from view toward the end of the narrative and it is the chief priests and elders of the people who decide that Jesus must be killed Matt 26.3. Elders of the people may or may not include Pharisees. Intriguingly the Pharisees reappear at Matt 27.62 as they with the chief priests ask Pilate to set a guard over the tomb of Jesus to prevent the disciples from stealing Jesus' body.

This only serves to bring the conflict between Jesus and Pharisees into sharper focus. If the Synoptic Gospels had portrayed Jesus as being primarily in conflict with chief priests who then emerge as the party which ultimately dispose of him then it would have made sense to relate that conflict in the gospel stories. In fact the Synoptics do that, not so much with chief priests, but with the scribes. Martin Pickup notes that Mark's Gospel records nine separate conflicts with

Pharisees, but records twice as many conflicts with the scribes.¹¹ In contrast, there is little conflict recorded between Jesus and the chief priests in Mark. They are mentioned explicitly for the first time when Jesus predicts his death at the hands of the chief priests, scribes and elders (8.31 and 10.33) and only really enter the story from 11.18 in reaction to Jesus' cleansing of the temple.

So scribes and chief priests are the main threat to Jesus, not Pharisees, though of course scribes are not hermetically sealed off from Pharisees in mark. We do have that enigmatic phrase the scribes of the Pharisees (Mk 2.16. Matthew makes use of the phrase scribes and Pharisees in Matt 12.38, 15.1. Luke is the one who most commonly puts scribes and Pharisees together at 5.21, 5.30, 6.7, 11.53.

If the gospels does not portray Pharisees as a threat to Jesus, what then is the purpose of the well developed description of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees relative to chief priests?

To put the question much more bluntly, if the Gospel does not need Pharisees to emerge at the climax of the story as the fall guy, why does

¹¹ c.f. Martin Pickup, 'Matthew & Mark's Pharisees, *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, Ed. Jacob Neusner & Bruce Chilton, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007, (67–112), 73.

the gospel devote so much space both to relating conflicts with Pharisees and to portraying Jesus repeatedly undertaking actions (contact or proximity with lepers, the dead, bleeding women, Gentiles and tax collectors) which would put him on a collision course with Pharisees?

I suggest that the conflict I recorded because it actually occurred not because it was important for the plot of the story. And one of the primary reasons for the conflict is that the Jesus movement and the Pharisee movement were contending for the same space in their understanding of holiness.

I suggest it is this profoundly theological conflict, rather than any need for a fall guy for the plot, which is the primary reason that conflict with Pharisees is so significant in the Synoptics and in Mark's Gospel in particular.

It is well attested that two of the most significant areas of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees were in matters relating to purity laws and table fellowship. It is easy to mistake these for symptoms of the same underlying issue. In fact I suggest that conflict around purity

laws and table fellowship were simply lightning rods for a deeper set of concerns which centred on two critical questions. First, what is the relationship between holiness and purity? Second, what eschatological expectations underpin operant understanding of holiness. To the first of these questions we now turn.

HOLINESS IN CONFLICT – PURITY

James Dunn insists that if we are to grapple adequately with Jesus' understanding of holiness we must explore his attitude to purity and impurity.¹² Dunn draws on the work of Jacob Milgrom in Leviticus who argues that of the two pairs, holy/profane and pure/impure, the dynamic categories are holy and impure while profane and pure appear more neutral, perhaps indicating the absence of the opposite, as darkness is the absence of light. This, he argues, makes impurity the effective antithesis to the positive power of holiness.¹³

If holiness is envisaged as a clean white shirt that we wish to keep pristine then dirtiness or impurity can be seen as a potential threat to that aim. In which case, impurity may be thought of in dynamic terms

¹² cf. Dunn (2003a), 172.

¹³ cf. Dunn (2003a), 171ff for more on this view.

as potentially encroaching and holiness in static terms. The impure thus needs to be kept away from the holy.

However, if in contrast we envisage holiness not as the white shirt itself, but rather that makes the shirt white, i.e. the bleaching agent, then holiness is a dynamic agent and contact with the impure does not have any effect on it, rather the impure is cleansed and made potentially holy.

In other words, just as impurity may be envisaged as potentially encroaching so also might holiness be seen as potentially encroaching, thus the one is the antithesis of the other. Hence, Jesus' activity or attitude towards impurity offers some insight into his understanding of holiness.

Dunn suggests that, 'Holiness was more important for Jesus as a power which cleanses uncleanness and dissolves impurity than as a status (of person or place) constantly threatened by the 'common' and profane.'¹⁴ Similarly Borg argues:

in the teaching of Jesus, holiness, not uncleanness, was understood to be contagious. Holiness – the power of the holy,

¹⁴ Dunn (2003a), 192.

the other realm – was understood as transforming power, not as a power which needed protection through rigorous separation.¹⁵

These conflicting understandings of holiness I suggest lie at the heart of some of the recorded conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark. For Pharisees the holy needed to be protected from being profaned by the unholy and impure, hence, the purity rules. Holiness is effectively a vacuum, an absence of impurity, defilement and sin; it is defined almost by reference to what is *excluded*. It is thus primarily a static understanding of holiness, one rooted in status with God and expressed through faithfulness to Torah.

Mark's Jesus, it appears, may have had a rather different operating model of holiness, which was equally rooted in faithfulness to Torah. Jesus' understanding of holiness seems to be as a dynamic power, with a missional imperative that the holy be put into close proximity or direct contact with the common, unclean, sinful or perhaps even profane with the consequence of transforming it.¹⁶

¹⁵ Borg, 135.

¹⁶ **cf. Milgrom's cautionary comments on the idea of holiness as contagion in...** For a comprehensive discussion of Jesus' attitudes toward table fellowship with sinners cf. Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, Leicester: IVP, 2005.

Viewed through this interpretive lens a number of Jesus' actions around which there are no recorded conflicts with Pharisees take on particular significance. Jesus touches the leper (Mk 1.40–45) but Jesus is not made unclean the leper is cleansed. It is interesting to note that the leper asks for cleansing rather than healing, and that throughout the pericope the language of cleansing is used.

Mark's Jesus follows this up with a number of other dubious actions. He consorts with Gentile demoniacs (directly in the case of the Gerasene demoniac of 5.1–20, and obliquely in the case of the Syrophoenician woman of 7.24–30). He draws attention to the fact that he has been touched by a bleeding woman (5.25–34 c.f. also Lev 15.25–27) and touches a dead child (5.38–43 c.f. Num 5.2). It is difficult to imagine many Pharisees undertaking any of these actions.

However, the evangelist raises no questions about ritual defilement on the part of Jesus. Rather than being profaned or defiled by any these dubious points of proximity or contact with the impure, unclean, profane, it is the people or the situations which are in proximity to Jesus which are transformed through their engagement with him.

What is the issue at heart around impurity and uncleanness in relation to holiness? Lev 15.31 makes it clear that people were to be clean in order to avoid the possibility that they might defile the tabernacle in their midst and thus die in their uncleanness: *Thus shall you keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.*

In this single verse we see the tension summed up relating to impurity and holiness. On the one hand, the holy is sufficiently fragile that it can be defiled by mere uncleanness. On the other hand, the holy is potentially dangerous; it can cause the death of the unclean.

In the case of Jesus, contact with the impure which others may have viewed as potentially defiling has precisely the opposite effect. In touching a leper (Mk 1.40–45) Jesus is not made unclean; rather the leper is cleansed. He takes a dead child by the hand (5.38–43) but is not defiled; rather she is brought to life. He eats with tax collectors and sinners (2.15–17) but is not infected by that contact rather he is the Physician who makes them well and some become followers and disciples.

Vermes insightfully concludes: ‘A clash with the Pharisees was ...only to be expected, therefore, not because they were obsessed with trivialities, but because for them the trivial was an essential part of a life of holiness....’¹⁷

Interestingly, of the recorded conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees, not many of them are explicitly about ritual purity. Jesus is challenged about table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2.15–17, Matt 9.11ff), lax attitudes towards fasting (2.18–22) and Sabbath observance (2.23–3.6) and hand and food washing (7.1–23). These are followed by the three test encounters around a request for a sign from heaven (8.9–12), questions on divorce (10.2–12) and taxes to Caesar (12.13–17).

HOLINESS IN CONFLICT – ESCHATOLOGY

The conflict between Jesus and Pharisees was not confined to questions about the precise relationship of holiness and purity. Indeed the more profound question was bound up in their eschatological expectations. This found particular expression around table fellowship conventions. Whalen notes,

¹⁷ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973), 56.

If we have learnt anything about first century Judaism in recent years, it is the diversity of belief and practice that characterized it. So with regard to table fellowship, a range of *halakhic* attitudes undoubtedly existed.¹⁸

Vermes notes that table fellowship was an important marker of relationship in first century Jewish society. It was a marker of unity and oneness and had eschatological symbolism of the anticipated banquet in the kingdom of God at the end of the age. For Pharisees this symbolism meant the exclusion of non-compliant people from table fellowship.¹⁹

Jesus in contrast seemed to seek out such people or to host meals including such people. All four Gospels relate the accusation made of Jesus that he ate with tax collectors and sinners. On the lips of Jesus himself we find the charge that he is both a glutton and a drunkard (cf. Matt 11.19). This conflict, it seems likely, is again indicative of alternative understandings of holiness.

What was at the heart of these differences in understanding? Both movements, I suggest, understood holiness to be inherently eschatological but had very different eschatological perspectives. That

¹⁸ Clinton Wahlen, 'Peter's Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity,' *NTS* Vol 51 No. 4, October 2005, 506.

¹⁹ cf. Geza Vermes, *Jesus in his Jewish Context* (London: SCM, 2003), 10ff for more on this view.

holiness is inherently eschatological is merely a way of acknowledging that the holy ultimately pertains to the divine sphere, it is an implicit part of the kingdom of God. To reflect on or aspire towards holiness to seek to engage with that which properly belongs to God alone. Hence the very idea of holiness is eschatologically nuanced.

Expectant anticipation of God's coming reign meant that holiness had a particular urgency. For Pharisees holiness was an eschatological imperative. Positively perceived, holiness promises the faithful a share in God's glory yet to be revealed. This is at least what it meant to be a chosen people and holy nation.²⁰ Negatively perceived holiness is not optional. God's people are to be holy because God is holy (Lev 19) but also because he is the One who judges all. Holiness is, therefore, both privilege and protection in light of the coming judgement.²¹

In the understanding of the evangelist, however, there is an even sharper demand for holiness in the ministry of Jesus which began with the assertion, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news' (Mk 1.15). These are the first words spoken by the Markan Jesus. Because the end has broken into

²⁰ cf. Pheme Perkins, *First & Second Peter, James and Jude* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 21.

²¹ cf. Peter H Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 17.

the present, holiness has become even more possible. Moreover, because the end is nigh the demand for holiness has become even more urgent, in order to be found blameless before the Holy One in judgement.

These differences of perspective come to a head in very different attitudes to table fellowship, but also lie behind the difference in attitudes to purity. If Vermes is right and table fellowship had eschatological symbolism of the anticipated banquet in the kingdom then the pharisaic exclusion of non-compliant people was not mere snobbery; rather it was a prophetic act and direct challenge to their non-compliance in light of the coming Day of the Lord.

I suggest that Jesus' very different attitude towards table fellowship was equally prophetic, but rooted in a different eschatological understanding. If holiness is essentially a divine attribute, then the presence of the holy is a sign of the divine breaking into the present and in this sense holiness is eschatologically nuanced. Owing to this eschatological nuance, holiness demonstrates a tension between the now and the not yet, exhibits elements of judgement, and offers glimpses into the divine.

Jesus' 'Galilean Manifesto' did not only declare that the kingdom of God has come near (now & not yet) it also called for repentance in light of this fact, implying judgement. This expectation of judgement imbues the call to holiness with an urgency and seriousness that might otherwise not be present.

However, it is the glimpses into the divine which is perhaps the most significant element of difference between Jesus and the Pharisees, for Jesus demonstrates something of the depths of divine grace. Through table fellowship with sinners Jesus affirms that it is not the well who need a physician but the sick (Mk 2.17) By his healing and liberating acts Jesus demonstrates that lepers, demoniacs, Gentiles, women, and children all can have a place in the coming kingdom. Jesus models an inclusive rather than exclusive ideal of holiness which itself points to God's ultimate purpose for creation, reconciliation to God.

HOLINESS: MERCY OR LOVE?

Marcus Borg argues that in Jesus' vision of holiness, mercy replaces holiness, noting that mercy consistently appears in opposition to holiness or behaviour mandated by holiness.²² He adduces in support

²² cf. Borg, 124.

of this view elements from a number of the most poignant gospel stories: that the behaviour of the Good Samaritan is differentiated from that of the Priest and Levite by its quality of mercy, that the prodigal father responds to his son's return with mercy, that in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee the tax collector appeals to God's mercy, and that that on two occasions in Matthew's gospel alone Jesus contrasts holiness to mercy, quoting Hosea 6.6.

Moreover, Borg goes on to cite Lk 6.27-36 as Jesus' revision of Leviticus 19.2, thus on Borg's reading 'Be holy as I am holy' of Lev 19.2 becomes 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful' on the lips of Jesus in Luke. Borg argues further that the heart of Jesus' holiness ethic is the *imitatio dei* and that the content of this *imitatio dei* is mercy, so that in Jesus' understanding, holiness (here understood primarily in terms of cultic holiness) is replaced by mercy.²³

I contend that Borg is correct in pointing out that Jesus had an alternative vision of holiness to that of the Pharisees. However, he is in my view wide of the mark, first in viewing Jesus as *replacing* holiness with mercy and, second, in his identifying of the crucial element in

²³ cf. Borg, 123ff for more on this.

Jesus' holiness thought as mercy, for it may better be described using Jesus' preferred word — love. The Gospels record fewer than 10 references to mercy from the lips of Jesus compared to over 50 references to love. Jesus' alternative understanding of holiness finds its ultimate expression in love. Contra Borg, Jesus does not seek to replace holiness with mercy or love but rather demonstrates holiness through love, particularly loving action.

It is here that Borg's idea of *imitatio dei* is helpful especially if one recognises that the content of Jesus' *imitatio dei* is not merely mercy, a somewhat weaker concept, but love. Indeed this *imitatio dei* is expressed primarily in Jesus' love commandments: to love God, to love neighbour, and even to love enemies (Mk 12.28–34; Matt 5.43–4) . The content of this *imitatio dei* may be traced back to the Holiness code of Lev 19, where the command to be holy is given concrete expression in terms of love of neighbours and of aliens (19.33).

EXCURSUS: PERFECTION THROUGH LOVE?

John Piper in his 1979 monograph *Love Your Enemies* explores the relationship between love of enemies and perfection as discussed in Matthew 5.43–48. He argues that the placement of 5.48 with its

injunction to be perfect (τέλειος) as your Father is perfect is deliberate and meant to be not simply a conclusion to the pericope dealing with love of one's enemies but rather a summation of the whole of Jesus' radical antitheses of Matt 5, most clearly expressed in love of enemies.²⁴

In Matt 19.21, the only other instance of τέλειος in the Synoptics, Jesus says to the rich ruler that in order to be perfect he must sell his possessions and give to the poor. Importantly, this is not an additional commandment; rather it is a radical restatement of the commandment to love his neighbour as himself.²⁵

It is instructive, in my view, that in Matt 5.48 one hears echoes of 'be holy as I am holy' in the injunction of Jesus to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. Moreover, it seems likely that Jesus sees all encompassing love as the means by which this holy perfection or wholeness is to be realised. It seems reasonable to deduce, then, that Jesus' injunction to be perfect as the Father is perfect is indeed a call to

²⁴ cf. John Piper, *Love Your Enemies: Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 146. cf. also R A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Waco: Word, 1982), 255 and Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 137-9.

²⁵ cf. Piper, 147-8.

holiness and a deliberate echo of Lev 19.2. However, Jesus highlights the fact that the way to perfection is by means of love.²⁶

CONCLUSIONS

I am indebted to Marcus Borg who demonstrates that Jesus' understanding of holiness is often expressed in the gospels in the context of conflict with the Pharisees. Whereas the Pharisees' pursuit of holiness was expressed primarily through concern for purity, Jesus' pursuit of holiness was expressed through concern for others and loving action, including love of enemies. It seems likely, then, that some elements of these conflicting approaches are preserved in the gospel stories.

Holiness in the Jesus movement as preserved in the gospels, then, is understood as dynamic. Holiness does not need to be protected from the profane but rather Jesus actively seeks contact with the profane and the unclean in order to sanctify and to cleanse. Holiness in the Jesus tradition is inextricably bound up with loving action: love for God, love for neighbour, and love even for enemies. Indeed it is only via the way of such self-sacrificial love that one may become perfect.

²⁶ NB: Witherington understands Matthew's gospel to view perfection primarily in terms of love beyond limit, inclusive even of one's enemies. c.f. Witherington (2006), 137ff. cf. also Piper, 146.

Jesus, of course, himself demonstrates this self-sacrificial love ultimately in the cross. Holiness in the Jesus tradition is radical and is the source of conflict because it calls for a radical re-evaluation of holiness in the light of God's self-revelation.

REFLECTION

Two challenges emerges for me from this interaction with the words acts and mission of Jesus.

First is that holiness is inherently missional. If holiness is rooted in the very being of God then that God has been revealed to us as one always reaching out towards all that God has created. This is perhaps the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus; they shrink back but he reaches out. There is no such thing as a holy huddle in Jesus' economy. It is in holiness that he reaches out to lepers, touches the dead, eats with tax collectors and consorts with the demon possessed.

Second is that the part of the holiness movement with which I am most familiar has too often unconsciously modelled its understanding of holiness on a pharisaic model than a Christological model. 'Come ye apart and be ye separate' has been in some quarters a rallying cry for

those who seek to be holy. It is understandable; it is in some ways biblical; that's what the Pharisees were trying to do. Nonetheless, Jesus models a more excellent way which understand the power of the holy to be greater than the power of the evil one. Greater is he that is within me than he that is in the world.

I pray that the Church of Christ might move from a defensive model of holiness to an offensive one because like Christ we see that the end has broken into the present and that the kingdom of God is at hand.

SERIES SUMMARY

RECURRING BIBLICAL THEMES ON HOLINESS

From the biblical material eight broad themes seem to emerge: (a) Holiness is divine; (b) Holiness is relational; (c) Holiness is corporate; (d) Holiness is rooted in the everyday; (e) Holiness is transformative; (f) Holiness is ethical; (g) Holiness is eschatological; (h) Holiness is perfection. These themes are not necessarily present in each of the texts explored, nor is emphasis equally distributed across these eight possibilities. Nonetheless, these themes seem consistently to arise as we listen to Old and New Testament voices on holiness. To an exploration of each of these themes we now turn.

1. HOLINESS IS DIVINE

Perhaps one of the most consistent themes to emerge from the biblical witness is that holiness is ultimately divine. Put another way, holiness is a description of the divine sphere; it is a designation that properly pertains to God alone. God alone is holy; holiness in any other sphere, whether of object or space, time or person, is derived and secondary. It is God who alone is the Holy *One*. That holiness is God's quintessential quality requires that we recognise that human holiness is therefore a work of grace. This is why Paul prays in 1 Thessalonians that God would sanctify them holy; he alone can do it for he alone is holy.

2. HOLINESS IS RELATIONAL

The recognition that human holiness is a work of grace brings us nicely to the second of our themes to emerge from the biblical witness: holiness issues from relationship to the Holy One. This is one of the significant insights to emerge from the biblical tradition. Indeed, it is in my view the principal means of understanding human holiness if one understands holiness to be ultimately God's possession. All talk of holiness other than God's therefore refers to a derived holiness. As Hartley notes, 'Because only Yahweh is intrinsically holy, any person or thing is holy only as it stands in relation to him.'²⁷

3. HOLINESS IS CORPORATE

Much of the discussion of holiness thus far may suggest that holiness is an individual pursuit and, of course, there is some merit to this idea. However, when we recall the OT idea of the people of God being holy and thus being a light to

²⁷ Hartley, lvii.

the Gentiles (cf. Isa 42.6), clearly what is in view is not holy individuals but a holy people. Similarly, in the Thessalonian discussion of holiness it is not the holiness of individuals which is primarily in view but rather that of the *ekklesia*.

The question that immediately comes to mind is how can a people be holy without each individual person being holy? Looking at the biblical witness in both Testaments it is clear that not every individual among the people of God was indeed holy. The sacrificial system, the ministry of the prophets, the instructions and rebukes of the apostolic writers, all attest to the fact that not all God's people are holy all of the time, and yet they remain the holy people of God. Milgrom is surely right to point out that Lev 19.2 is addressed to the whole community and not just priests, Levites or Nazirites. Put bluntly, the whole community, including its worst sinners, is viewed as capable of being holy.²⁸

This apparent contradiction may be in some measure resolved if holiness is understood as relationship. People are holy not because they are good, or righteous, but because of their relationship to the Holy One. Put another way, there is an ontological sharing in the nature of God; because the people of God belong to the divine sphere they reflect his nature in much the same way that inanimate objects may be rendered holy by entering the divine sphere. It is out of this existing reality of holiness that people are called to live out the demands of holiness. Some people do so faithfully; others do so less faithfully. What this inevitably leads to is a tension between the corporate holiness of the people of

²⁸ cf. Milgrom (2000), 1606-1607.

God and the failure of individuals to behave in a manner which is consistent with their being the holy people of God. Some of this tension will be explored further in the section looking at the inherently eschatological character of holiness. What needs to be noted here is that the idea of holiness as relationship enables us to hold on to both a corporate and an individual understanding of holiness.

Further, corporate holiness is rooted in the triune nature of God. If holiness is God's quintessential nature, fundamentally who God is, it may be inferred, then, that the holiness of God exists only in the community of the Godhead, in the eternal relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. This being the case holiness is primarily corporate and only secondarily individual.

This may be a helpful corrective to theologies of holiness in which if any thought is given to the idea of corporate holiness it is subjugated to the idea of individual and personal holiness. If however the holiness of God finds expression primarily in the context of eternal relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit then it seems reasonable to deduce that not only is human holiness experienced solely in relationship to the Holy One but also human holiness may only be experienced in the context of relationship to the holy people of God.

4. HOLINESS IS ROOTED IN THE EVERYDAY

Related to the idea of holiness rooted in personal and corporate relationship is the idea of holiness rooted in the everyday. Leviticus unpacks holiness in terms of

farmers leaving some of the harvest for the poor, employers not exploiting workers, the able-bodied not taking advantage of the disabled (cf. Lev 19.9–13).

This was very much part of the understanding of Jesus and the territory over which he was engaged in conflict with the Pharisees. Jesus in his attitudes to table fellowship, his active seeking out of sinners, his friendship with tax collectors and prostitutes, and his alignment with the poor consistently demonstrates a concern to locate holiness not in the rarefied atmosphere of the temple cult, or in Pharisaic pursuit of cultic purity, but rather in the everyday lives of ordinary people. This is one of the outcomes of the understanding of holiness as relationship. If holiness issues out of relationship to the Holy One then all of life has the possibility of being transformed by the holy and so all areas of life may reflect the holiness of God.

5. HOLINESS IS TRANSFORMATIVE

This leads into the next theme, that of the idea of holiness as transformative. Holiness is not a ‘thing’ that one can possess but it is nonetheless an objective reality. Part of the evidence of its objective reality is its affective nature; simply put, being made holy through relationship to the Holy One does not leave the entity, object, or person, or people unchanged, rather it is transformed.

It was this transformative understanding of holiness which appears to have underpinned Jesus ministry and which put him into conflict with the Pharisees. For the Pharisees the holy needed to be protected from being profaned by the

unholy and impure, hence, the purity rules and table fellowship conventions. For Jesus, the holy needed to be put in contact with the unholy as a means of transforming the unholy and impure. This is at least part of the reason that Jesus touches the leper, draws attention to the fact that he is touched by the woman with the issue of blood, and eats with tax collectors and sinners.

We find this transformative element in virtually all of the contexts that we have considered. In 1 Thessalonians Paul talks about it being reported that the Thessalonians had turned to God from idols, and in Romans of death to Sin. Lest we think this is but a New Testament perspective we need to remember Isaiah's eschatological vision of a society transformed by holiness in Isa 35. Moreover, it is this understanding of the transformative nature of holiness which underpins the ministry of the prophets. They are convinced that holiness can transform society so that it may more accurately reflect the image and nature of God.

6. HOLINESS IS ETHICAL

One of the areas in which transformation is expected is in the area of ethics. I have made the point that holiness is not merely to be equated with adherence to ethical rules. Put another way, ethical is not a synonym for holy. Nonetheless, it would be a gross mistake to argue that holiness and ethics have nothing in common. Indeed, in all of the texts we have explored we see an assumption of a necessary link between holiness and good ethical behaviour.

It should be noted that this necessary link between holiness and good ethical conduct infers not only a negative prohibition of sinfulness but also a positive pursuit of righteousness. Holy ethics as envisaged in 1 Thessalonians 4, therefore, includes not only the negative prohibition of sexual immorality but also the positive pursuit of living peacefully with all. In Leviticus 19 holy ethics includes the negative prohibition of idols, theft, lies, fraud, and vengeance, but also includes the positive pursuit of justice, care for the poor, alien, and disabled, Sabbath keeping, and the honest transaction of business. In the prophets holy ethics includes both the negative prohibitions and the positive pursuits of the covenant. In the gospels we see Jesus being equally scathing in his condemnation of sin as he is of the failure to pursue what is right.

The biblical witness is consistent in declaring that there is a fundamental contradiction between holiness and sinfulness; they should not coexist.

In what sense, then, can it be asserted that holiness is ethical? Holiness is ethical in the sense that human holiness often finds expression in good ethical conduct. However, owing to the eschatological nature of holiness this expression of holiness continues to be incomplete. To a discussion of this issue we now turn.

7. HOLINESS IS ESCHATOLOGICAL

Part of the reason for the close relationship between holiness and ethics is the eschatological nuance of holiness. This eschatological nuance, along with the idea of holiness as relationship, is perhaps one of the most insightful elements to

emerge from this study. If holiness is in essence divine, then the presence of the holy among us is a sign of the divine breaking in upon the present and in this sense at least holiness is eschatologically nuanced. Owing to this eschatological nuance, holiness demonstrates a tension between the now and the not yet, it exhibits elements of judgement, and it offers glimpses into the divine.

Now and not yet

Perhaps the most positive element of the eschatological character of holiness is that it is sign of the age to come breaking in upon the present age. Because holiness is always a matter of divine dispensation it is a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God.

This means that holiness necessarily shares the now/not yet tension of the kingdom of God.²⁹ Believers are already holy now, because of their sharing in the objective reality of the holiness of Christ our true High Priest. Yet they are still working towards holiness and are actively in pursuit of holiness, without which none shall see the Lord (Heb 12.14). We are children of God now, we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation now, and we who were not a people have already become the people of God through the action of Christ.

Nonetheless, we have not yet become perfect as our Father is perfect (Matt 5.48), nor entered into God's rest as has the pioneer of our salvation (Heb 4.11,14), nor

²⁹ For more on the kingdom of God and now/not yet tension cf. W G Kummel, *Promise and Fulfilment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, London: SCM, 1957 and David Seccombe, *The King of God's Kingdom*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002.

raised to live with Christ (Rom 6) nor seen the living hope of an inheritance – imperishable, undefiled and unfading— kept in heaven (1 Pet 1.4).

It must be noted that the eschatological character of holiness is not only a New Testament perspective. Isaiah, in particular, articulates an eschatological vision of all the nations streaming to the holy mountain to offer worship to the Holy One (Isa 58). Even the priestly discussion of holiness is located within the expectation of being a light to the Gentiles (cf. Gen 12), and in this regard also has eschatological overtones.

Judgement

The eschatological character of holiness also includes an element of judgment. Indeed part of the eschatological outlook was against a background of impending judgement. The ministry of the prophets was certainly located within the context of the avoidance of divine judgement. Moreover, in all of the New Testament texts explored, there is an expectation of the imminent end of the age, which carried undertones, if not overtones of judgement. Indeed, Jesus launched his Galilean ministry with the Manifesto: Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.

This expectation of judgement imbues the call to holiness with an urgency and seriousness that might otherwise not be present. Similar expectation of judgement underpins much of Paul's discussion of holiness in 1 Thessalonians because the discussion takes place in the context of the expectation of imminent parousia.

Glimpses into the divine

These eschatological elements of being a light to the Gentiles and of judgment also offer glimpses into the divine. If holiness is the quintessential quality of God, then whenever holiness is experienced or observed it is a glimpse into the heart of God. This is of course the end to which the eschaton ultimately proceeds, the apprehension of God as he is and the redemption of the entire cosmos.

8. HOLINESS IS PERFECTION

It is this eschatological understanding of holiness which enables us to speak with greater clarity of holiness as perfection. Many Christians have some unease with the idea of Christian Perfection.³⁰ These concerns are understandable for perfection is something that we are instinctively uncomfortable ascribing to ourselves. Moreover, to many, the idea of holiness as perfection perhaps sounds uncomfortably close to sinlessness.

However, when we remember the eschatological nuance of holiness then some of these concerns begin to melt away. If holiness properly belongs to the divine sphere and to the age to come then the idea of holiness as perfection becomes perhaps a little less objectionable. Though we might not be entirely clear what this perfecting might entail, we are perhaps intuitively less inclined to take issue with the idea of being perfected in the age to come.

³⁰ Indeed this unease with the terminology of perfection is not novel; it can be traced at least as far back as Wesley in the mid 1700s. From his journals and letters we discover that he had to defend his doctrine of Christian Perfection repeatedly. This led him to publish in 1741 his sermon on *Christian Perfection*, then in 1760 his *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, followed by his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* which underwent revisions and enlargements up to 1777.

It does, of course, need to be acknowledged that the word translated perfect (τέλειος) is closer in meaning to ‘complete and whole’ than it is to ‘that which cannot be improved in any way.’ But even this clarification does not move us on very much because many feel that humanity is far from complete and will remain so no matter how much they grow in holiness. This issue has perhaps as much to do with one’s anthropology as it does with one’s theology.

Nonetheless, perfection is undeniably one of the themes of holiness which emerges from the biblical tradition and it cannot simply be ignored because it is inconvenient or even incomprehensible. So how might this idea of holiness as perfection be understood?

Bearing in mind the inherently eschatological nature of holiness we therefore understand holiness as a foretaste of what is to come. As already noted what we have in the objective experience of holiness is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a glimpse of the future, a deposit of what is to come, and the first fruits of the harvest. First fruits are indeed real fruit but not the whole of the harvest. A deposit is hard cash in hand but only a fraction of the due sum. A foretaste and a glimpse are genuine experiences of tasting and seeing but are inevitably frustrating in their fleetingness. So it is with holiness as perfection, it is a genuine but incomplete perfection.

WHAT IS HOLINESS ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE?

Having reviewed these recurring biblical themes on holiness we are perhaps now in a better position to attempt to answer the question what is holiness according to Scripture. Holiness is ultimately God's alone because it is his quintessential quality. Whenever we speak of holiness we therefore speak of the presence and the action of the divine for holiness is possible only through gracious divine dispensation. Holiness is therefore relational; persons and places, times and spaces can only be holy as they relate to and share in the character of the Holy One or in some way come under his sphere of belonging.

Owing to the fact that holiness is relational it is therefore rooted in everyday experience. Indeed this is the enduring eschatological vision, that every part of the cosmos be transformed by the redemptive work of Christ, so that our ethics, our values, our relationship and our very beings reflect the nature of the one who has 'called us out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet 2.9). Holiness is, therefore, inherently eschatological; it is a vision of what is to come; a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, it is the first fruits of the perfection of the age to come.

So what is holiness according to Scripture? It is to have an eschatological relationship with the Holy One which transforms our ethics, our everyday lives, our established societal patterns and even the entire cosmos so that they reflect the perfection of the age to come. Holiness is to share in the life of the divine by the gracious act of the Father, in his Son, through the power of the Spirit.